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ABSTRACT

Literacy learning practices in the context of a girls' school in Pakistan are described as part of a larger study. "School ka sabaq" or "school lesson" is recognized as involving reading and writing activities as well as behavior particular to the institution of the school. The goals of school ka sabaq, which are to pass exams and acquire credentials, are determined by and limited to the institution of schooling. Although the teachers do not include in their goals the transfer of skills learned at school to reading and writing needs in everyday life, the community members mention these as an expected or desired outcome of "school ka sabaq." A description of the reading and writing activities along with the division of time and space in the school shows that literacy activities are reflected in and determined by the context of the particular institution within which they are learned and practiced. School-community relations and the community's goals for girls' literacy are also described. (Author/LB)

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School ka sabaq: Literacy in a girls' primary school in rural Pakistan[1]

Iffat Farah

This paper (which is part of a larger ethnographic study) describes literacy learning practices in the context of a girls' school in rural Pakistan. In this context, school ka sabaq is recognized as involving reading and writing activities, and behavior particular to the institution of the school. A description of the reading and writing activities as well as the division of time and space in the school shows that literacy activities are reflected in and determined by the context of the particular institution within which they are learned and practiced. The author also describes school-community relations and the community's goals for girls' literacy.

Introduction

In this paper I will describe the girls' school in the village of Chaman to acquaint the reader with the context in which reading and writing is taught and learned. I will also discuss the attitudes of the community members towards the school and the teachers, and the community's goals for schooling.

At present almost all the boys and a large number of girls in Chaman are admitted to the kattchi (pre-grade) in school. School ka sabaq2 is gaining importance for both boys and girls since it is expected to teach skills and obtain goals that cannot be achieved by learning only the Islami sabaq3. These goals have become important to the members of the village community in the present complex social and economic context of the village.

Chaman has a primary/middle school for boys and a primary school for girls. Up until a few years ago there was a primary school for boys only. The girls school was established only six years back. Before these schools were established, only the most motivated boys went to middle or high school in the near by villages and the girls did not go to school at all. As an older woman put it, "there are schools for boys and girls

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here now. God helped and there is a school here. Before they had to go out and if they have to go out then we don't let our girls go" (interview, 5/4/91).

The girls' school in Chaman falls under the jurisdiction of the directorate of schools in Attock, which is responsible to the Secretariat of Education of Punjab Province. In order to observe in the school, I had to obtain permission from the District Directorate for girls' schools. The head of this department gave me a letter, in English, instructing the principal of the school to allow me to observe. However, in reality, the letters did not much affect whether I was encouraged to observe.

During my first week in the village, I visited the school. The two teachers there were welcoming, though a little apprehensive about whom I would report the information to. When I explained that I was writing a book and that it was for a requirement to pass an exam, they seemed to become sympathetic. I shared lunch with them and parted on very friendly terms. After that, the teachers were very friendly though not always interested in answering my questions. I visited the school at least four times a week over a period of three months. The teachers and the villagers seemed to be comfortable with my visiting the school.

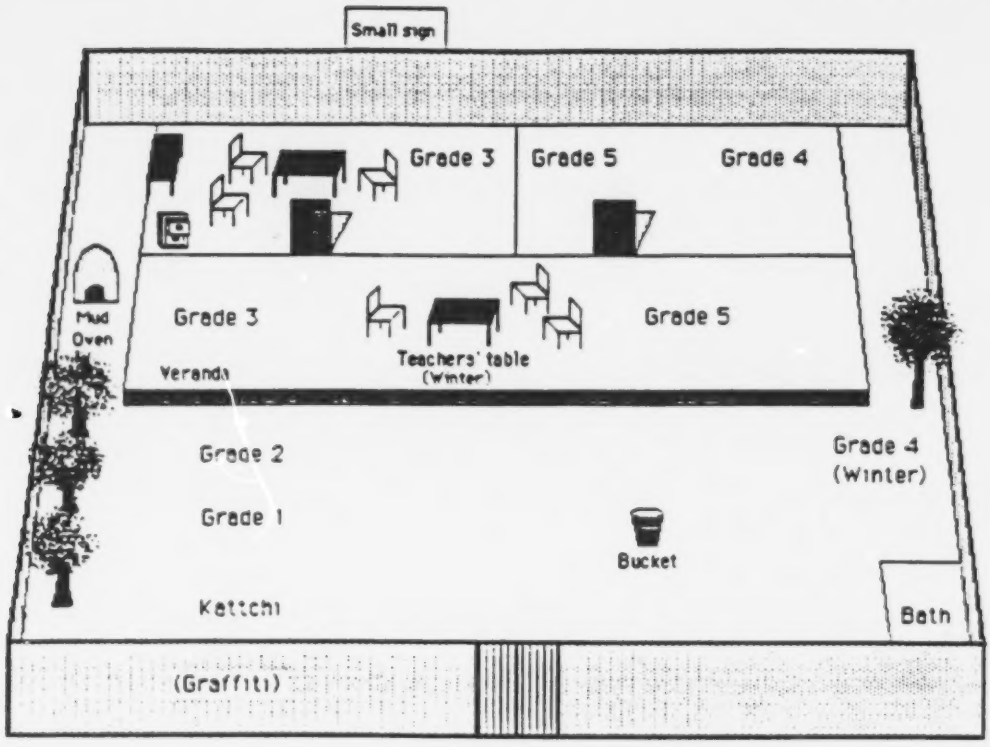
The School Setting

Physical Description

The school has two rooms, a veranda and a small courtyard. The walls surrounding the courtyard are high so that no one can look over from the street. There is a wooden door at the end of the courtyard and that is the only entrance to the school. The door is usually open and has a sackcloth curtain hanging on it. There are no signs on the door, only an advertizement written in white chalk or paint on the wall. A small board with the name of the school is placed high on the roof of the veranda and is not easily seen.

There is not much furniture in the school. There are two old desks, three chairs, and a number of sackcloths, one for each child to sit on, brought by each newly admitted child. After school, the sackcloths are stored in one of the rooms and brought out every morning. In this same room are also kept copies of the Quran that the Grade 4 and Grade 5 girls read every morning.

The other room has a desk in one corner where the teachers keep their lunch, a steel *almirah (*cabinet) which has old records and other official papers, and a steel box in which teaching materials supplied by the government are kept. Both the *almirah* and the box are locked and were opened only once--when I asked to see some old registers. There is a small blackboard, hung on the wall in this room. It has five



The Girls' School in Chaman

columns drawn in chalk with a grade in each column. This is the attendance board on which the teachers are supposed to write the number of girls present in each grade each day. I did not ever see it being used during the period of observation. On one of the walls of the rooms are two charts brought by former students whose brother had made them. One of them says, "Respect your elders," in Urdu and the other has a paragraph on the life of Iqbal, an Urdu poet. A map of the Punjab lies hidden behind the table. In different corners of the veranda were two blackboards, which had for a long time a math problem on one and Urdu alphabets written on the other.

The school has two teachers and a total of eighty students in the *kattchi* and grades 1 through five. The senior teacher, who is also the principal of the school, is responsible for Grades 4 and 5 and the second teacher is responsible for the *kattchi* and Grades 2, 3, and 3.

Division of Space in the School

When I first visited the school in March, the weather was still cool and the teachers sat outside on the veranda, at the one desk they shared. A third chair, the only other one in the school, was brought out for me. Though the children are divided

into grades, this was not immediately evident when I first entered the school, since they do not sit in separate rooms and move freely around.

The grades are distinguished in terms of the space they occupy in the courtyard. The *kattchi*, Grade 1, and Grade 2 sit against the right wall of the courtyard. The *kattchi* is at the far end, closest to the outside door, and Grade 2 is at the other end near the veranda, with grade 1 in the middle. There is no empty space between the different grades and the movement of children from one group to the other is quite free. Grades 3 and 5 sit on the veranda on either side of the teacher's desk and Grade 4 sits next to Grade 5.

In the summer, the teachers moved their desk to one of the rooms and Grade 3 moved in with them. Grade 4 and Grade 5 moved into the second room, whereas the rest of the grades remained where they were under the trees in the courtyard. The lower three grades were then more cut off from the teachers. They depended more on each other for learning, and the older girls in these grades took on more responsibility for maintaining discipline.

The division of space in this school appears arbitrary and almost shocking to an outsider for whom class divisions are represented by separate classrooms for each grade, with the teacher in front of the class and the students sitting in rows facing her. However, it is not by coincidence that the different grades occupy the space that they do in this school. As one of the teachers explained to me, "we put Grade 3 near us because they are troublesome" (fieldnotes, 5/27/90). Thus behavior problems are important and must be paid attention to. Grade 5 also sits close to the teachers but the goal for this is different. Grade 5 is the final grade in school and the girls have to take the final primary school certificate examination. Therefore, they are the focus of the teachers' attention. The lower grades are at a distance from the teachers and are the least directly monitored by them. In my observation, as I will discuss further, this resulted in much peer interaction and learning from each other and from the higher grades.

Spatial divisions in this school (as well as the division of time discussed in the following section) are marked by practice and reflect local notions of learning and control. Although the teachers complained that it is difficult to manage so many children in a small, physically unmarked space, in practice this kind of division does not pose many problems. In a later section, I describe how children arrange themselves in groups (in circles or in rows) or come up individually to the teachers depending on the type of literacy activity. These movements have been learned at school and associated with the manner in which *school ka sabaq* is learned. For both

teachers and students, teaching involves modelling. Learning comes from copying and practice. Constant monitoring or continuous close interaction between the teacher and the students around the text is not very important since the teacher is concerned with the first and the last stage of the teaching and learning process, i.e. modelling and correct production (cf. section on reading in *kattchi* through Grade 2). Once the procedures and movements appropriate during *school ka sabaq* are learned, they are displayed by the student and accepted by the teachers. This point is elaborated in the later sections of this chapter.

Division of Time in the School

The school officially begins at eight in the morning and is over at two in the afternoon. The beginning, end, or any other division of the lesson is not marked by the ringing of a bell or any other external signal. The bell is rung only twice: at the half hour recess at 11:30 when many children go home to eat their lunch and the teachers eat at school, and at the end of the school day.

In the beginning, I was hard put to figure out from initial observations alone if there was any pattern to the school day. Closer observation and inquiries from teachers and children showed that the division of time is set by the authority of the teacher and the institution of the school. The teachers had, at the beginning of the year, told the girls the sequence in which the various subjects were to be learned during a day. This sequence was Religion, Math, Urdu, recess, Social Studies and Science. The activities of *kattchi* and grade 1, however, alternated only between reading the Urdu *Qaida* and writing on their *takhti* (wooden copy boards). This sequence is understood and followed even though there is no written timetable and, as mentioned above, there is no bell or other signal to mark time.

The amount of time spent on any subject or activity appears to be negotiated between the teachers and the students, apparently through one or two representative students in each class. Student requests to recite an old lesson to the teacher or to come up for a new lesson are put to the teacher and confirmed or rejected by them. For example, after spending some time doing math, a representative student from a grade went up to a teacher and asked if the class should get a new lesson in Urdu or read out an old lesson (fieldnotes,4/1/90). When these requests are not made, the students (especially in the lower grades) practice reading or writing according to what they think they are expected to do at a particular time. One way that the students in different grades (again, especially the lower grades) show the teacher that they are doing what is desired and expected of them is to come up and show the teacher the

work that they have been doing (writing on the *takhti* or doing math problems on the slate or making pictures).

In the morning, the upper three grades bring their homework notebooks with copied answers to the questions asked at the end of a lesson and pile them on the teacher's desk. The teachers do not read or correct the work, but put a check and the date on it. I did not hear the teachers telling the students what their homework for the day was. For class activities, only occasionally do the teachers call out from behind their desks to instruct what a particular class should do.

Thus, although the students appear at first glance to be in considerable control of their activities and the division of the day, deeper observation reveals that they know that time at school has to be spent on ritualistic learning and practice of the *sabaq*.

Following Bloome (1989), I suggest that the division of space and time, as well as the reading and writing activities at school (discussed in the next sections) show that the teachers and children associate certain procedures and behavior patterns with *school ka sabaq*. The children know what behavior patterns are expected of them to demonstrate that they are doing their schoolwork; they display these patterns even if they do not learn from them. Street and Street (1991) describe literacy practices in a school in middle-class America and argue that the authority of the teacher and the institution over the construction of time and space is manifested in two ways: the physical divisions such as walls, labels, and bells, and through the practice of literacy itself. In this school in rural Pakistan, the divisions and procedures are not as overtly regulated by labels, walls, timetables, and constant directions from the teachers as they are in the school that Street & Street describe. However, they are present. They are more implicitly constructed and maintained through practices established by the authority of the teachers as well as the notions of *school ka sabaq* shared by the students and teachers.

Events at School

Chores

The children arrive at the school before the teachers. The first ones to arrive are older girls from grades four and five. The doors have been unlocked by one of the men who lives close to the school and has the key to the school building. The children bring out the teachers' table and chairs and also their own sackcloths. If the floor needs cleaning, some of the girls from lower grades are asked to sweep. They also bring water in buckets from a nearby house and place it in the courtyard. The water is used to wash their *takhti*. Two of the girls bring milk from their homes for the teachers to take

back with them. Another girl washes the teachers' dishes from the previous day's lunch, lights the wood in the mud stove and heats the milk so that it will not go bad before the teachers can take it home. Thus, the tradition of doing chores for the *Islami ustad*[4] is extended to the school. Although I never heard anyone complaining about the chores girls did for the *Islami ustad*, chores for the school teachers were often resented by the parents. A possible reason for this attitude is that the *Islami ustad* does not take any money for her services, whereas a fee (even though nominal) has to be paid for the secular school and the school teachers are perceived as employees since they are being paid for their services even if not directly by the parents.

The Assembly

Many times when I reached the school at eight in the morning the teachers were not there yet, but the children had organized themselves on their own and were conducting the assembly[5]. The assembly is the first event of the school day and the teachers play no part in it. The older girls arrange each of the grades in separate lines. Then they decide among themselves what to recite and who recites at the assembly. There are a few short prayers in Arabic that they may choose from and a famous children's prayer poem in Urdu. The poem has been memorized. Two or three of the older girls each recite a short prayer or poem before the assembly and all the girls repeat after them.

The assembly does not have much literal meaning for the children since the prayers and poems chanted are in Arabic and in Urdu and not literally understood by the majority of the children. The assembly also represents the focus on form and disregard of literal meaning which was discussed earlier (Street & Street, 1991:153). However, the assembly is significant as a ritual associated with the school. It is also significant that the school starts without the presence of the teacher. The control over the appropriate format of such activities, which is exercised through the teachers in a school based on a Western framework, is here transferred to the older students. This is possible because of the caretaking and monitoring roles learned at home and encouraged at school.

Reading at School

Kattchi through Grade 2

As mentioned earlier, children in *Kattchi*, Grades 1, and 2 sit the farthest away from the teacher and are the least monitored by them. The reading and writing

materials they bring to school are a beginning Urdu reader, a qaida, a slate and chalk, a *takhti*, pen, and ink.

Almost all the children have been introduced to print and reading/decoding before they come to the school. The children start learning to read/decode the Quran in Arabic at a very early age, almost always before they enter school. Their exposure to oral or written Urdu is not systematic however. Some children may have visited the cities with their parents and have had some interaction in Urdu. A more common exposure to oral language is the television and radio (although not every home has a television) and the letters that are read out loud to the family by a neighbor or a brother or sister. Written material in Urdu to which the children have been exposed are: writing seen on television, shop signs and graffiti they see on the walls (especially when they visit Hazro), letters, older siblings' school books, and for some, magazines and newspapers that their mothers or fathers have around the house.

The children have had limited contact with oral and written Urdu before they come to school.[6] They might have sat with their older siblings as they read or wrote their lesson at home. For example, sometimes very little children came with their older sisters to school, if the mothers were out visiting. They sat with a book, recited numbers after their sisters, or just watched what was going on in the school (fieldnotes 4/2/90). School provides the first extended and completely textual exposure to Urdu. The first book at school is the Urdu *qaida*[7] which introduces the Urdu alphabet and leads to reading simple sentences. When the child comes to school, she is familiar with most of the letters of the Urdu alphabet through the first Arabic *qaida*. The Arabic *qaida* presents all the letters of the alphabet first, followed by letters with diacritic markers for short vowels, and then words. The letters and words are learned in the context of the Quran which does not allow accompanying illustrations.

The Urdu *qaida* is illustrated. Each letter is presented with a picture of an object that represents the sound of the letter. Words with consonant-vowel combinations and different consonantal positions are introduced simultaneously with the letter. The Urdu *qaida* very quickly builds up to simple sentences. Diacritic markers are used often in the first book. Gradually most diacritic markers are dropped. Only those representing short vowels are retained and sometimes even these are dropped.

Book One has longer texts and contains both prose and poetry on such topics as our Prophet, my village, the sun, and my doll. The later books introduce more difficult vocabulary and grammatical structures, and include comprehension questions at the end of each lesson.

In the beginning grades, the teacher gives lessons individually to each child. The teacher reads out a few words or sentences in the child's book and the child repeats after her. At the end of the lesson the child goes back and repeats to practice the lesson.[8] If they forget something or even want to read further than the lesson that they have been given, help is always available from peers or from girls in the higher grades sitting next to them. Children in this grade often sit together in pairs or groups, often handling, opening and closing their books. They frequently read in each others' books and talk in Hindko. The teacher does not give the lesson to each Grade 1 everyday. There are instructions from the teacher like, "Grade 1 come and recite the lesson," and the class goes to stand or sit near the teacher's desk. Then each child goes to the teacher, her book open at the appropriate lesson, and reads out loud. If they can not read a word, one of the following four things happens: (1) the teacher helps by providing the word and the child repeats it and carries on with the reading; (2) the child backs up and reads the preceding few words or starts reading the sentence all over again; (3) the child attempts to spell out the word; and, (4) the child attempts the last two strategies, fails, and gets a scolding or is hit by the teacher. Number 2 is obviously an attempt to jog the memory into recalling the word. Number 3 could be a strategy that the child has learned in reading the Quran since I did not observe the teacher give any lessons on spelling and sounding out words in school. None of the strategies mentioned above show any attempt to guess the word from the context. I will further discuss this inattention to the meaning both by the teacher and the students in the section on language in school.

Grades three through five

In Grade 3 more of the reading lessons are given to the children as a group. Usually one girl from the class asks the teacher to give them a lesson. If the teacher agrees, the class as a whole comes and sits around the teacher with their books open. The teacher reads from her own book, usually a sentence or a phrase at a time. The children repeat after her, looking in their books and following with their fingers. However, I noticed several times that the fingers were not on the appropriate words. At the end of the lesson, the class would go back to their places and practice. The lesson could consist of a paragraph or a page. If the girls have a problem in reading while they are practicing, they do not go to the teacher for help but ask each other or children from a higher grade. In Grade 4 and Grade 5, the girls are reading more on their own. I did not observe teachers giving an Urdu lesson as they had to the lower grades.

The scope of reading increases from Grade 3 onwards since then the girls must read lessons in Science and Social Studies. However, even in these lessons I observed no attempt by the teachers to explain anything in either Urdu or Hindko or to require an understanding of what was read. The goal of learning these lessons appeared to be memorization and oral and written recitation of answers to the questions at the end of each lesson in the text. Memorized answers were recited to the teacher apparently without any concern for understanding. Several times I observed girls bringing their notebooks to the teacher in which questions and answers had been copied. Standing with their backs to the teacher and to their notebooks, the students would recite the answers they had copied. Sometimes answers from two different subjects were recited one after another. For instance, a girl from Grade 4 recited an answer about Qaid-e-Azam, the founder of Pakistan, followed, without pause, by one on the properties of steam.

This type of recitation is not part of verbal interaction since the teacher does not ask the questions nor does she always pay attention to what is being recited. The children recite the answer verbatim. When they forget a word they repeat the preceding few words over and over, trying to recall the memorized word. The teacher either supplies it or, if there are too many such memory lapses, she shouts or slaps the child.

When I asked the students about the reading, their answers showed that they are not yet able to talk fluently in Urdu. Students in Grade 4 and Grade 5 do understand more of the meaning than students in Grade 2 or three. However, this is not necessarily an outcome of the teaching--perhaps only those girls who were bright, were motivated to learn, had family support, or had help at home, continued school through Grade 5. During the time of observation, there were twenty girls in *kattchi* and eight each in Grade 4 and Grade 5. Registers from previous years showed a similar ratio. We can conclude that the rate of dropout is at least 50%.

Writing

Kattchi through Grade 2

All writing before Grade 3 is on *takhti* or on slates. Writing on both these surfaces can be washed or rubbed off. A practical reason could be that children do not handle notebooks carefully. Notebooks get torn and are used up, whereas a *takhti* or slate can be used for a long time. In addition, the *takhti* has been a traditional surface for practicing writing Arabic and Urdu scripts. The exclusive use of these surfaces,

however, suggests a message that writing at this stage is only for practice and has no permanence.

Notebooks are introduced from Grade 3, but some writing practice on the *takhti* continues. The girls wash their *takhti* in the bucket many times during the day. This accounts for the constant movement in the courtyard. The *kattchi* class spends a lot of time writing on their *takhti*. I noticed that if the teachers wanted to talk to each other or visit someone outside the school, they would very often ask the lower grades to write on their *takhti*. Writing in the *kattchi* requires copying five or six Urdu letters from their *qaida* across the *takhti* and then copying each letter in a column. On the back side, they write numbers in Arabic numerals (which are referred to as English numerals) from 1 to 20 or as many as they could fit on the *takhti*. I did not observe the teachers writing out the numbers on the board for the children to copy, but they reported that they do so.

The children in Grades 1 and 2 copy sentences from their Urdu readers or they write their own names and the name of the school that the teacher had shown them how to write. Almost all of the writing involves copying words and sentences. This activity is mechanical and most children do not seem to understand nor are they required to understand what they write. Many times as the children came to show their work, I noticed that they had copied only half the sentence and had begun it again, or had left it incomplete if there was no more space on the *takhti*. Often the words were written incorrectly with letters left out or not joined properly. When I asked the children to read what they had written, they were unable and said that they did not understand (fieldnotes 4/1/90). Throughout the morning, the children bring a *takhti* filled with writing to show to the teacher. During my observation, the teacher never pointed out an incorrectly copied word or showed how to write it correctly.

The children in these grades also do some math which includes simple addition and subtraction. The numbers are said in Urdu but written in English numerals. Slate and chalk are used to do math and drawing.

Grades three to five

In Grade 3, children begin to study Social Studies and Science as well as Religion, Math and Urdu. The lessons in Social Studies follow the same pattern as the Urdu reader. Writing on the *takhti* continues as handwriting practice, but now it is supplemented by writing in the notebooks. In their notebooks, children write not only to practice, but to keep a permanent record for future use during the academic year. Questions and answers are copied in their notebooks. The teacher tells the class

where the answer to each question is located in the text. The children neatly copy the questions and answers in their notebooks.

The writing in the book is used for oral memorization. Every day the children are called upon to recite their lesson in Science, Social Studies or Religion. They bring their notebooks open to the appropriate question and answer, turn their backs to the teacher and the notebook, and recite the answer. For the summer holidays, the task for Urdu was to copy the entire Urdu reader in their notebooks. For other subjects they were to copy out in a new notebook all the questions/answers that had been done in class. No homework seems to be given to *kattchi* and Grade 1.

Another writing activity from Grade 3 onwards was dictation. This is an important activity since it is the only one where the children are not copying from a text. However the dictation is given from lessons that the children have already copied and practiced several times. Dictation is given by one of the girls in the class. She also checks the girls' notebooks against the words in the book or in her own notebook where she has already copied them from the book. Anyone who makes a mistake gets hit on the palm with a stick.

In Grade 5, girls begin to do some grammar composition which involves reading, writing, and memorization. Time is now spent on copying out definitions, synonyms, and antonyms from an Urdu book of grammar and composition. For copying definitions (all in Urdu), the page is divided into two columns. The work is shown to the teachers who might ask them to recite the definitions. I did not find teachers ever explaining the meaning in Hindko or Urdu. Once, while checking a notebook, I found that the meaning of one of the words was wrong. The notebook's owner brought the book from which she had copied to show me that she had copied it correctly. She had, in fact, copied it correctly, but the definition in the book was incorrect. Only when I asked the teacher about it, did she explain the correct meaning to the student.

The girls also learn to write essays, letters, and applications in Grade 4 and Grade 5, since these are a part of the Urdu examination for Grade 5. These are also learned through copying and memorizing. The teacher writes essays on the board using topics that are expected to appear in the final exam for primary school. The children copy them in their notebooks. They memorize the essays and practice writing them many times so that they can duplicate them on the exams.

Once, when the teacher had asked Grade 5 to write and essay on "My School," I volunteered to sit with them and check their work. As each girl finished the essay and brought it to me to read, I found that they were all identical. I told them that they should

look around and write about what they see and think about their own school. I also asked each girl about the school, the activities she liked, and then asked them all to write their own essays. The girls brought back their new work. It was the same essay copied all over again. When I told this to the teacher, she said, "Oh, they are supposed to write the same essay. They have no sense; they can't write anything on their own." The teacher had written the essay on the board; the girls had copied it in their notebooks and memorized it. The girls all wanted to get it right in the public exam at the end of Grade 5, the teacher explained.

My insistence that the girls use their own ideas to write the essay and my disappointment in finding out that they had neglected my directions and had copied out the teacher's essay again were based on my assumptions about the functions of writing. For me, writing in Urdu is a natural channel of self-expression and I assumed that this was so, or that it should be so, for the girls in the Chaman school as well. The girls resistance was a message that my assumptions were unjustified in this context. Although some Grade 5 girls wrote letters outside of school, most of these letters were for parents and relatives and were dictated by others. More importantly, writing in the school was not done to express oneself but to practice and to writing correctly.

Fishman (1988) reports similar resistance from children in the Amish community to writing a journal. She explains the resistance she met from the children in doing this type of writing in terms of culture specific values and functions associated with writing. Fishman (1991: 30-31) describes copying for a report writing task in the Amish school and suggests that "like workbook writing, report writing highlights what is valued and expected by the school and the community that runs it: students must work hard, stay within the lines, and get things right."

In Chaman, the school expects the children to write correctly, get the right answers, and pass the exam. For the parents as well as the community in general, passing the exam and obtaining school credentials are greatly desired goals and an expected outcome of schooling. As children repeat after the teachers and read and write only from the school text both in the Islamic school and the secular school, they learn that only what is in the text and what is expected by the teacher is right. Such belief in the authority of the text and the teacher may be explained as part of traditional Muslim education (Eickelman,1978).

Functions associated with writing are both culture- and context-dependent. They are socially determined by cultural institutions of home, mosque, school, or village within the context of which reading and writing are practiced. Failure of children or adults to read or write according to Western assumptions does not necessarily imply

their failure, but perhaps a failure on our part to understand and acknowledge their particular context and associated practices. My observation in the school shows that the only writing that the children are asked to do in school is copying or writing from memory. There is no opportunity or encouragement for any independent expression in writing.

There were only two instances where I saw some writing that was not copied or memorized from the text. One of the girls in Grade 3 wrote "*Benazir Zindabad*" (Long Live Benazir) on the wall of the class. This was rubbed off within the day. The second instance was when the teachers found that one of the girls in Grade 4 had written some romantic verses on a piece of paper and was reading it out to a friend. Her brother, she said, had copied verses from magazines and she had gotten it from him. The teachers were very angry and threatened to report to the parents. "This is the reason your parents don't send you to school," one of the teachers said (fieldnotes, 5/30/90). Another instance of using writing at school for a purpose other than doing a lesson was observed when any of the girls was absent and sent an application for leave. These were signed in the girl's name and followed the exact format for application writing learned at school with appropriate days filled in.

An important, yet difficult point to determine within the scope of this study, is whether students (especially in the lower grades) do not understand what they read or write because they are never presented with tasks requiring textual comprehension or creative writing; or, as the teachers suggested, because they can not. In Grade 3, the children seem to have very little idea of what they are copying. Often they copy the words incorrectly or stop at half sentence, starting all over again. They do not seem to have a sense of what a sentence is. The teachers also say that the children do not understand much of what they read. This was confirmed at school when I asked the children from Grade 3 and Grade 4 questions about the text or asked them to write a word without looking in the text and they were at a loss. However, when I asked the same children outside school to read from their text and then asked them questions about it, their responses showed that they did understand several words and had at least a general idea of what the text was about. In answer to the question, "Do you understand what you read at school?" Grade 3 replied that they understood a little. Grade 4 and Grade 5 said that they understood most of the texts that they read and write.

The language of the school text is not the first language of the child nor the language of oral communication at this school. The fact that the children are required to read and write at school in a language other than the language of oral

communication certainly contributes to their difficulties in reading and writing. However, I believe that the lack of understanding of *school ka sabaq* is also an outcome of the goals of the teaching and learning in the school. Reading and writing in the school context are done to memorize, practice and reproduce texts, not to interpret and express. The text is "the outside authority to which they [the teachers and the students] are both subject" (Street & Street, 1991:152). The purpose of reading and writing at school is the mastery of the text.

Thus, literacy at school is confined to school practices which focus on the text itself and not on what it means to the individual students. This concept of school practices is implied by parents, children, and teachers in their use of the word *sabaq*. For example, when Rubina told me about how she learned to read without going to school, she said that when her brother read "*sabaq*" at home, she would sit with him and try to read the stories. When I asked her if her brother brought story books from school, she answered, "I read the stories in his school book," (7/4/90). It is interesting to note that she refers to his reading as "reading the *sabaq*" since he is doing it for school, whereas she read for herself and therefore calls them "stories."

Language at School

All oral interaction in school is in Hindko and all writing is in Urdu. Teachers give directions, explain math problems and generally talk to the children and to each other in Hindko. However, all that comprises *school ka sabaq* (reading, writing, copying, and reciting) is in Urdu. Thus, the school has a diglossic situation in which the languages Urdu and Arabic are used exclusively for writing and Hindko for speech. Except for explanation of procedures to solve math problems, which is done in Hindko, texts were never explained in either Hindko or Urdu.

English in the primary school is confined to reading and writing numbers. The narrative part of the math problems in the textbooks are in Urdu and the numbers are written in English numerals and said in Urdu.

The children pay little attention to the content and do not understand most of what they read and write at least until Grade 5. One of the reasons for this is that the lessons are in a language that is not the home language of the children or the teachers. The level of difficulty in reading in a second or foreign language is related to competence in the second or foreign language. Since there is little Urdu language input in the village, the children's competence in Urdu is minimal on entrance to the school. However, by Grade 5 those children do learn to read in Urdu with fair comprehension.

Two factors that appear to positively influence learning to read and write in a second language in this context[9] are the closeness of structure and vocabulary of Urdu and Hindko, as well as the similarity between the writing systems of Arabic (the children's first language of literacy) and Urdu. Support for this positive influence is found in research in Morocco which found that the introductory literacy experience in the Quranic schools positively influenced children's acquisition of literacy in a second language at least in the initial stages of reading in the public school (Wagner, 1983; Wagner, Spratt, Gal, Ezzaki, 1989).[10]

A second reason the children do not read or write in a semantically meaningful way is that the school does not demand semantic interpretation or explicitly connect the reading to anything that they may use outside the school. The explicit goal of reading and writing at school is to pass the exam, although the skills learned at school are transferred to literacy tasks outside school.

Interaction in Class

The fixed position of the teachers and the freedom of mobility of the students influence the pattern of interaction in class. For the lower grades who sit far away from the teacher, most of their interaction with her is on an individual basis. Directions are given to the class and requests made to the teacher through a representative of the class. These representatives may be self-selected from time to time but are also nominated by the teachers based on the height or age of the girl. Teachers scarcely leave their place at the tables to go to the different grades to either give lessons or monitor children's activities.

Students in higher grades, which sit close to the teacher, have a more direct interaction as a class with the teacher. Questions can be asked of the teacher and often the Grade 5 girls would sit around to "just talk". However, even in these classes, few questions were asked directly of the teacher. In Grade 3 and Grade 5, I regularly observed a representative make decisions, negotiate with other students, begin a lesson, or tell the teacher that they were ready to recite a lesson to the teacher or take a new lesson. Homework was collected and brought to the teacher by a representative from each class without the teacher having to ask for it.

In the absence of a formal classroom setting with the teacher in the front and the children on fixed seats in rows, the children have learned to organize themselves in different seating arrangements. One day I watched Grade 5 as it changed its position from sitting in rows facing the teacher with each girl walking up to the teacher to recite her *sabaq*, to sitting in a group around the teacher who was explaining a math

problem, to rearranging in a single row in front of the teacher to do the problem themselves.

The ease of movement for the students and lack of attention from the teacher encourages a lot of peer interaction. I observed girls in *kattchi* and grade 1 sitting in pairs as one girl read and the other listened to her while looking at the book. Girls also watch each other write. As mentioned earlier, problems in reading and writing were seldom taken to the teachers. Help was sought from another classmate or from someone from a higher grade. Even Grade 5, which sat close to the teacher and received a lot of attention, asked each other for help if they had problems. The teachers delegated disciplinary as well as teaching roles to the students. Girls from higher classes as well as a girl in each grade tried to maintain discipline and brought complaints to the teachers.

I often observed events such as: a girl dictating difficult words to the class (fieldnotes, 5/27/90); one student in Grade 2 reading out sentences from a lesson and the rest of the class repeating after her (fieldnotes, 4/1/90); all students in *kattchi* through Grade 3 standing in rows and reciting math tables after a Grade 3 student (fieldnotes, 5/27/90). These modes of interaction, in which children help each other and older children help in the care and instruction of younger children, are a reflection of interaction in the community. In the village community, from a very young age, girls are responsible for taking care of their younger siblings. People help their neighbors constantly in writing letters or doing other chores. These patterns of care-taking and providing mutual help are reflected in the interaction at school.

The Teachers

At the primary school for girls at Chaman there are two teachers. Hamida is the senior teacher. She is about forty years old and has been at this school for six years. She has a high school certificate and has done the primary school teaching course. She has taught in schools in other rural areas. Many of her relatives live in a village in the area, but she does not visit them very often. Hamida's husband used to work in the Navy and she lived in Karachi for three years. He is retired now and they have lived in the city for many years. She has three children who go to English medium private schools in the Attock. She is proud of her children and often compares them to the children at school, saying how much better her children are in behavior and school work.

Khalida is the younger teacher at the school. She has been at the school for three years. She also has the high school certificate, but has not done any kind of teacher training. She is not married and lives with her parents and a brother.

Khalida's parents also come from a village near Chaman but have lived in the city for many years. Her older sister teaches at a private college and lives in Rawalpindi, the twin city with the capital. A few of Khalida's other female relatives are also teachers in schools. Her parents are fairly poor. Her father does not work any more and her only brother is a school dropout looking for a job; they can both read and write fluently in Urdu. Her mother can read the Quran but cannot read Urdu well even though she had joined an adult literacy center for a while.

Both Hamida and Khalida hire a wagon that takes them to school every day along with many other teachers who also pay a monthly fare. The bumpy ride in the crowded wagon takes an hour. The same wagon brings them back. They both want to be transferred to the city which, they told me, is very difficult to arrange. It appears that these are not the only teachers who want to be transferred from village schools. The director for girls' schools told me, "They all want to be transferred; I am overwhelmed by requests. The phone is ringing all day" (interview. 4/5/90).

Teacher Community Relationship

"God, the families are awful, you will find out. They talk against us. They say you come to teach here all the way from Attock....Most parents are uneducated. Their children never open their books after school. Only some parents who are educated see that they study. The children fight with us and backbite" (fieldnotes, 4/1/90). "Your *baji* (older sister, here reference to the teacher) is pretty, but she doesn't teach anything". (fieldnotes, 5/27/90). "I have seen the environment at the girls' school, I won't send my daughter there" (interview, 6/25/90).

As these quotes suggest, both the female teachers and the parents in the community are critical of each other. The major topics of complaint by the teachers at the girls' school are: the parents are uneducated; they don't help their children with any school work, even if they have themselves been to school; they take their children away from the school for chores or for visiting relatives outside the village; they pressure the teachers to pass their children; they don't have good manners themselves and encourage bad manners in the children.

My observations confirmed that the teachers have a negative opinion of the village parents. When I asked the teachers if they sent any report cards or other written messages to the parents, one of the teachers said, "What will they know? They

are all *jahil* (ignorant). They will only put their thumb impressions. They don't know what is happening" (fieldnotes, 4/2/90). While I was observing at the school, one of the girls lost her *takhti*. Her father came to the school door and sent in a letter to the teacher complaining that the child's *takhti* had been lost.[11] Hamida, the older teacher, was very angry and shouted at the child, "Your father is very *parha likha* (literate/educated) that he has sent this written note. Couldn't your mother come and talk to me?" (fieldnotes, 4/20/90). Obviously, for the teacher, writing is serious and is more challenging than an oral complaint in that it suggests that the father is claiming equal status with the teacher.

Sometimes a few girls would come to school without the school uniform or with uncombed hair. The teachers would remark that these girls come to school dirty because their parents are *unparh* (illiterate), their mothers fight with each other and keep their children dirty (fieldnotes, 9/4/90). Hamida constantly compared her own children to the village children, telling me how her own children wash and iron their clothes and behave well.

The attitude of the community toward the school and the teachers is ambivalent. Almost all the people I formally interviewed, and others with whom I talked informally, said that they were happy that there was a girls' school and many said that they would like a middle school for girls in the village as well. However, the number of girls in the upper grades of the school does not support this opinion, since there are only eight girls each in Grade 4 and five and many more dropouts.

The community members criticized the teachers for being city women, working for wages outside the home, not teaching the children well, failing the children, and not promoting[12] them to a higher grade at the end of the year (fieldnotes, 7/19/90, 3/26/90). Occasionally remarks are made about teachers asking the children to bring food for them and making them do chores at school. Negative attitudes towards teachers sometimes arise because of the expenses of school or because the teachers' imposition of rules such as wearing the school uniform.

Incidents that were narrated to me by the teachers or those that occurred during the period of observation confirm the existence of friction between the parents and the teachers. The teachers told me of an incident that had occurred a year before. One of the girls at the school had been absent for a few months. Her mother had taken her to attend the marriage of a relative. When she came back, the teachers told her that her name had been struck off the register. Her mother came to the teachers and, instead of politely requesting, started fighting with them, calling them names, saying that they thought too much of themselves and that the school belonged to the village and not to

the teachers. The teachers said that after that incident, they decided not to re-admit the girl. The parents went to the councillor[13], who talked to the teachers and then asked the mother to apologize to them.

A few incidents of conflict occurred while I was at the school. Twice, parents refused to pay the fee (two rupees which was later reduced to fifty *paisa*). A mother and a grandmother came to argue with the teachers, saying that they did not teach well, so why should they pay them any money (fieldnotes, 4/20/90).

The teachers visit only a few homes close to the school including the family of a male high school teacher in an English medium school in the city, his brother's family, and that of the councillor. Occasionally, lunch is sent to the teachers from these homes. They told me that only a few families are nice. Besides, they said, they do not want to go around the village much because people would talk.

Conflicts between the teachers at the girls' school and many of the community members have their roots in more than these particular incidents. They stem from differing concepts and attitudes associated with literacy/illiteracy, schooling, and city/village values. The teachers categorize most of the villagers as illiterate (which includes the characteristics of being uncouth, dirty, and conflict oriented) and unaware of the practices and authority of the school. On the one hand, the villagers respect the institution of school, yet, on the other hand, they associate negative-Western values with secular schools. Furthermore, they are not comfortable with the changing social scene in which the women are taking up jobs. Thus, the teachers who come from the cities to teach represent a contradiction: as teachers, they deserve respect within the cultural framework; as women who have gone out of their homes to work, they challenge the spatial and behavioral boundaries delineated for women within the community.

The Goals of Schooling

Observation and interviews with the teachers show that the literacy goals of *school ka sabaq* are for the children to learn to read the school books correctly, remember the answers to the questions at the end of each lesson in Urdu, Social Studies, Science, and Religion, be able to successfully reproduce these orally and/or in writing in the district exam, and pass the exam for promotion at the end of each school year.

The goals of the parents are more diverse. They share with the teachers the goals of attainment of school credentials and promotion to higher grades, but express other beyond-the-school goals. The literacy goals of the parents for their daughters,

mentioned in formal interviews and informal conversations, are for them to be able to read and write letters and to understand things better. "She wanted to leave school when she failed Grade 4, but I sent her back. At least she will be able to read and write letters," (4/13/90) says Karon's mother who reads the Quran regularly, but who can not read and write in Urdu, calling herself *unparh*. Nazma's mother cannot read or write either, but she sent Nazma to school. "I made sure that Nazma went to school so I could have someone to read and write letters and read the bills for me" (fieldnotes, 4/6/90). Mohammad Riaz' daughter is in Grade 6 at a middle school in a nearby village. "I allow her to go to school and study so that she can read and write letters and understand things" (Interview with Mohammad Riaz, 4/12/90). All the individuals interviewed who sent their daughters to school in the village said that they (both the girls and their families) expected the girls to learn to read and write so that they would not have to depend on others for everyday tasks such as writing letters. Thus, the immediate goal of sending girls to the school is for them to become able to read and write letters in Urdu.

The community strongly associates schooling with jobs. This is apparent in both positive and negative remarks about the goals of schooling. Girls who had dropped out of school reported that their parents, brothers, or other relatives had objected to their going to school, saying that the girls did not have to get jobs and become teachers so why should they go to school. Schooling beyond primary Grade 5 is not considered very important for girls because they are not expected to work outside of their homes. When asked if being school literate is important for them, women said that there is no need for literacy in the village because there are no offices.

To summarize, *school ka sabaq* is recognized as a special literacy practice by the teacher, the students, and the community members. It involves specific types of reading and writing skills, specific texts, and appropriate behavior supported by and practiced within the context of the school. This context is reflected in the division of time and space, and in the type of interaction between teachers and students and among the students at school. The goals of *school ka sabaq*, which are to pass exams and acquire credentials, are also determined by and limited to the institution of schooling. These goals are shared by the teachers and the community. However, although the teachers do not include in their goals the transfer of skills learned at school to reading and writing needs in everyday life, the community members mention these as an expected/desired outcome of *school ka sabaq*. These beyond-school-goals (extra-curricular) explain the negative attitude of some community members

towards schooling. A higher level of schooling is associated with women's work outside the home and is therefore rejected as against the community's social values.

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[1] This paper is a modified version of one chapter from the author's doctoral dissertation, Becoming literate: A study of literacy practices and goals in a rural community in Pakistan.

[2] *School ka sabaq* literally means school lesson. The villagers perceived the school as a separate domain. All reading and writing done at school through school texts as well as non-textual lessons learned at school were referred to as *school ka sabaq*.

[3] *Islami sabaq*, or Islamic lesson, includes the reading of the Quran and/or other religious books and learning behaviors appropriate to an Islamic way of life.

[4] The Islami ustad are woman religious teachers who teach the Quran in their homes. They do this as a service to Islam and receive no payment for it. Their remuneration is the respect and service of the community.

[5] This manner of conducting the assembly varies across schools.

[6] I am not making a claim that none of these children have ever interacted orally or with a written text in Urdu since I did not follow all children all the time, but my report here is based on what I generally found to be the case.

[7] *Qaida* (from Arabic) means a reader or a primer. It is used for the initial introduction of the writing system.

[8] A similar manner of learning through practice is found in the Islamic school.

[9] In the context of the village, Urdu is never used for oral communication (except with the rare outsider who does not know Hindko) and all writing is done in Urdu. The only oral input is through the radio and television.

[10] The two sites have similar contexts: neither Berber or Hindko is widely used as languages of literacy. In both countries, initial literacy takes place in Quranic schools, after which standard Arabic in Morocco and Urdu in Pakistan are learned as literary media in the schools.

[11] Another girl had taken the *takhti* home by mistake.

[12] Promotion to the next grade is based upon in-school exams prepared by the school's teachers and given at the end of each year. Upon completion of primary school (in Grade 5), the students take public exams. These exams are district-wide and are administered at designated schools. The students are tested in Urdu, Math, Science, Religion, Social Studies, and Art. The percentage of students who pass the exams is considered a reflection of the level of competence of their teachers.

[13] A person elected by the village to represent it to the district council.

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